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Appreciation of the Current Situation in Indochina

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note: The following was written in French [REDACTED] on 9 February 1947.)

The Viet Minh (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi) is an association of several political parties which combined in 1941-1942 and whose aim is to achieve independence for Viet Nam and to free the people of Viet Nam from the yoke of French fascist imperialists.

During the Japanese occupation, Viet Minh partisans succeeded in establishing bases in the Thai-Nguyen and Bao-Kan (mountainous region of Tonkin), to launch guerrilla attacks to harass the enemy. In other zones, their clandestine press succeeded in rousing in the minds of the people, who were suffering from starvation and the cruelties of the Japanese, a feeling of comradeship and common struggle. Groups of young fighters were organized. The movement gradually spread.

The aim of the Viet Minh was in harmony with that of the Allies, and they received with open arms the aid of Chinese and Americans. They also sought the friendship of the French (the French of Tan-Lai who were saved by the Viet Minh from the Japanese at the time of the events of 9 March 1945), because the "Free French" were on the side of the Allies, and Vichy French colonialism, on its knees before Japanese imperialism, no longer constituted a direct threat.

The day of the General Insurrection coincided with the Unconditional Surrender of the Japanese, and the last days of August 1945 saw nearly all of Viet Nam under the control of "Peoples' Committees" organized and guided by the Viet Minh. A provisional government, under the presidency of Ho Chi Minh, was formed, and declared Viet Nam an independent nation on 9 September 1945.

The provisional government of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, from the first days of its power, found itself faced with thorny questions, both national and international.

National Questions

Political: In order to install a democratic political rule, the government had first to abolish the decayed old feudal system. A delegation sent to Hue (the ancient imperial capital) was officially present at the abdication of the Emperor Bao Dai in favor of the new government. At the same time, in all the provinces the hierarchy of Mandarins was dissolved (sometimes the struggle was bloody) in favor of the system of "Peoples' Committees" (of villages, provinces, and so.) Each elected committee has its president and vice-president; two commissars, one political and one military, are attached to it. Sometimes the president or vice-president and the commissars are members of the Viet Minh. Most often, only the two commissars are members. Thus the Peoples' Committees function with the aid of the Viet Minh, lest the system be misunderstood, and in order to avoid slipping back into the decayed old system of the "Council of Notables." The people, formerly animals to be sacrificed, now citizens of a free nation are beginning to understand and to take seriously the rights and duties of citizens.

In step with these administrative measures, the Viet Minh organizes "National Welfare Associations", of workers, technicians, peasants, women, children, merchants. These associations, which include a large part of the population, aid greatly in mutual understanding between persons of similar social status. The result is not only a meeting of men, but also of public entities through the adhesion of the members. Above all, the masses are introduced to the idea of struggle, and the specialization of the masses in this struggle. Thus the Peoples' Committees, and the "National Welfare Associations", have been the two fundamentally revolutionary measures initiated by the Viet Minh. The people have accepted them, not as an historical accident, but as the finish of the impotent feudal system, and the awakening of the strength and sense of duty of the masses.

The application of these two measures has been facilitated by the struggle against illiteracy (a struggle which was often resisted by the French and the old Mandarin regime), and by the development of the press. Newspapers increased tenfold and, in cooperation with the Hanoi radio, give full commentaries on the recent

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insurrection, the evils of the old regime, the prospects of a bright future which still requires sacrifices.

Economic: The Japanese-inspired inflation, the flood of Chinese notes, and the treacherous decree of the Banque de l'Indochine in repudiating the 500-piastre notes cast a black shadow over the financial situation. Somehow or other, the public treasury, although incurring large losses by the abolition of taxes and duties, gradually recovered, owing to the National Welfare Associations and so-called "collection weeks."

Production had also been seriously affected. Two million people died of starvation; 60% of the tillable lands of Tonkin were covered by floods; Cochinchina, the granary of the country, was attacked by the French. The country was saved by the appeal of Ho Chih Minh to the nation to increase production to the greatest possible extent and to make the most economical use of the available land; and also by the use of agricultural cooperatives.

International Relations

The disarmament of the Japanese was accomplished (1) by the British, south of the 16th parallel, (2) by the Chinese north of that parallel.

The provisional government sought always to facilitate the task of the Allies, although the British helped the French attack in Nam Bo (Cochinchina), and the Chinese brought with them a new element of internal trouble: the Vietnamese Kuomintang. It is noteworthy that the Vietnamese Kuomintang is only a degenerate outgrowth of the "Party of Nobles" founded by Nguyen Thai Hoc, who was executed at the time of the Yen Bai Insurrection (1930-31). Helped and partially equipped by the Chinese militarists, this party ceased to play a political role after the withdrawal of the Chinese troops; inasmuch as its adherents consist of disparate elements, without a clear and coherent political doctrine or a definite program of action and, though they have some forces under arms, they are usually without any solid support in the progressive elements of the masses. The government maintained a rather passive attitude towards them, with the expectation that their opposition would disintegrate of itself.

Ever since the end of World War II, the French have shown a hostile attitude towards the Vietnamese. At the very beginning, in the wake of British bayonets, they opened an attack in Nam Bo (Cochinchina.)

When the Japanese disarmament was completed, the French returned to replace the British and Chinese. The events in Nam Bo taught them to be more prudent and to use means which were less direct, but relatively safer and less compromising. On 6 March 1946 they signed a preliminary agreement with the Vietnamese Government with the aim of ending hostilities and preparing the way for a treaty between the two countries. (Without having the documents available, it would be risky to go into the details of this preliminary agreement. The same applies to the Dalat Conference, and the Fontainebleau "modus vivendi." Besides, it would be idle to attach too much importance to the politics of intrigue, which do not shed a clear light on the true policies of the Viet Minh masses.) By means of this preliminary agreement, the French succeeded in landing a strong army in Indochinese territory (its numbers are greater than those permitted in the agreement, namely 50,000.) Although France recognized the freedom of Viet Nam within the French Union, the French have attempted, by all sorts of indirect means, to revert to their old colonial policy. The true cause of such a policy may perhaps be explained by the economic crisis in France following the disaster of World War II. Viet Nam would be a factor for the restoration of more or less stability in the French economy. That is a question which is important to France as well as to Viet Nam. Understanding would be difficult, but is it impossible? Which side should bear the blame for the present conflict? Is it France, one of the Big Four, with her stronger army and her means of justifying herself somehow or other internationally and before the UN, or is it the young republic of Viet Nam, lacking any regular

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armed forces, suffering no less from the effects of World War II and, above all, lacking means to justify herself before the entire world which has been deceived by the insidious propaganda of the French?

At any rate, a young and weak country, badly in need of peace in order to consolidate its organization, could not possibly have wanted to run the risk of inciting the Haiphong Incident (19 November 1946) and the Hanoi Incident (19 December 1946). A free country cannot allow its customs officers to be fired upon. A free people cannot allow the police in their capital city to be under control of persons who make further and further demands upon them. Peace was answered with war. France attacks; Viet Nam defends herself.

The war has lasted more than two months. How much longer will it last? What will be the outcome? It would be difficult and dangerous to attempt a positive answer to these questions. But it is not entirely impossible to clarify in some measure the problem by examining the opposing forces.

At the outbreak of hostilities, the strength of the French Army (in Indochina) was more than 80,000. At present, the number is more than 130,000. If reinforcements continue to arrive, it will shortly reach 150,000. The French have armored cruisers (of which the Richelieu is one), cruisers, Spitfires, Junkers, Dakotas, tanks and trucks. They are therefore well equipped. They have a great general, General Leclerc, the hero of the liberation of Paris. They have captured Saigon and Haiphong. At Hanoi, although they are in possession of the airport of Gia Lam and are laying siege to the still-resisting Sino-Annamite quarter, they have not yet cleared the outlying districts, and the junction between Hanoi and Haiphong is not yet made. Nam Dinh (80 kilometers south of Hanoi), even with the arrival of parachutists, remains still in a state of siege. The same is true of Hue. During the very first hours of hostilities, the French garrisons at Vinh, Thanh-Hoa, and Phu-han-Thuong, laid down their arms. Thus the French successes to date have not been very brilliant, unless one counts the exploits of the Spitfires, which machine-gun the civilian population and sometimes bomb even the concentration camps of French soldiers, one of whom was Sgt. Leclerc, son of the famous general. Some of the Germans in the French Foreign Legion are deserting and joining the Vietnamese forces. This war is only a war of attrition for the French; and unless they succeed in bringing in an army of 500,000 men (an estimate made by a captain in the Foreign Legion), success will remain uncertain. In compensation, to date there have been no material profits.

On the Vietnamese side, it is estimated that they have more than 100,000 (armed men) in the north, and more than 50,000 in the south. But they are not regular troops, trained for pitched battle. The principal centers are defended in part by "Tu Ve" (Defense Volunteers), assisted by Government troops. In general, they use guerrilla methods, with the valuable experience gained in the anti-Japanese struggle, in a land of mountain and jungle, and the strategy of "scorched earth" in the plains. They have a considerable number of light automatic weapons and the guerrillas replenish their supplies of arms by capturing weapons from their enemies.

Basically, the chief weapon of the Vietnamese Government is the political stability of the people. The war is no longer one solely between two armies, for the rule of the new democracy has inculcated into the minds of the people the hopes of freedom, the consciousness of collective responsibility, and the object which is being defended. It is this that explains the fanaticism of the Tu Ve of Hanoi, and the impossibility of treachery or disorder in the Home Front. The corner-stone is the discipline of the Peoples' Committees. Under the old regime, when a Mandarin gave himself up to the enemy, his province was totally lost. Times have changed. A puppet government set up by the French in order to divide the Vietnamese would have little success. Among the most ardent patriots, collective responsibility and love of the object which is being defended; among lukewarm Annamites, distrust of French treatment and fear of reprisals for having worked in the Peoples' Committees or for having taken part in anti-French demonstrations: these considerations will push the people to an all-out struggle. The spirit of struggle and sacrifice is decidedly great and lofty.

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Internationally, the world is becoming more and more interested in the Vietnamese conflict. If it continues, the repercussions will be great in Siam, Burma, India and Indonesia. Besides, despite French propaganda, the world is beginning to believe that the Viet Minh, although organized by certain former communists, are not following a Red policy. A "Peoples' Committee" is not an exact copy of a "soviet"; and universal suffrage (in Vietnam) contains no anti-democratic features. The Viet Minh are not nationalizing all the great estates and great factories. They never speak of the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat"; and have even organized "National Welfare Associations" of bankers, in collaboration with the government. They do not put into effect the equal distribution of land, nor do they adopt measures of agrarian reform similar to those of the Chinese Communists. In order to understand the situation clearly, it is necessary to follow the bitter struggle of the Viet Minh against the Communists of the 4th International (Trotskyists). The latter always demand the application of these two fundamental measures of Communism, and the dictatorship of the proletariat marching in step with the peasantry. The execution of their leader, Tu Thu Thau, and the imprisonment of the remainder, and some repercussions which were quickly suppressed. The Indochinese Communist Party itself - one of the constituent parties of the Viet Minh - was dissolved ("dissolved itself") in October 1945, since the Viet Minh, far from wanting to make a sudden leap to Socialism, foresaw first a revolution which will be bourgeois, democratic, and anti-feudal. They are trying to create a democratic bourgeoisie, leaving private property intact. President Ho Chi Minh himself, in his several speeches, has often referred to the texts of the declaration of rights of men, in the time of the French and American Revolutions.

Are the Viet Minh therefore Communists, as Admiral d'Argenlieu recently declared? Are they Communists simply because they are unlike the Vietnamese Kuomintang, which blindly hates the French more than anyone else? Are they Communists simply because they fought the Trotskyist Communists who demand (world) Proletarian Revolution now that the bourgeois revolution has started? Are they Communists simply because they have had the sympathy of such men as U Ba Maw, Nehru, and Chandra Bose? Or are they Communists simply because, while Duclos, Thorez, and Cachin adopt an attitude of reserve in expectation of a coup d'etat (in France) which is not entirely impossible, France itself is less communistic than Viet Nam?

In striking the balance-sheet of the opposing forces, it is clear that if the French are the stronger materially, the Vietnamese are the stronger morally. In case the war is prolonged, and supposing that the French capture all the great centers, will order be restored? With the strategy of "ceaseless struggle", the Viet Minh will continue to stir up riots and guerilla operations and it is doubtful if the extremists will not then gain the upper hand in the Resistance Movement. What might not then be the likelihood of a violent revolutionary movement, more or less Trotskyist, not only in Viet Nam, but also in Siam, Burma, India and Indonesia? Such a movement might cause a change in the strategy of the Chinese and Russian Reds, who are no longer at present advocating world revolution.

Although the war is still raging, it would not be surprising if hostilities were to cease in a few months: France has had her war of attrition without any material profits so far. As the world becomes more and more interested in the Vietnamese question, France will have to justify herself before her people who have seen their young sons decimated in the last disaster and now still more before the forthcoming (March 1947) Conference of Foreign Ministers at Moscow, for not having been able to use more peaceful means.

If France under any circumstances should ask to negotiate, Vietnam would welcome it with open arms, on the sole condition of independence, according to President Ho Chi Minh's declarations. Vietnam needs peace in order to get organized more solidly. She is sacrificing herself only for her independence. When the principal objective is attained, she is ready to make some small concessions for peace. Will it come?

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